History Trails:
An Undergraduate Journal of History from the University of Wyoming

Volume 1 (Fall 2007)

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UW class of 2007 and M.A. Candidate, 2009
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Introduction to Volume 1 (Fall 2007)

Undergraduate studies in history at the University of Wyoming are inclusive of a broad array of topics and areas of focus. Understanding the diversity of student historical endeavors, it seemed appropriate to permit our inaugural issue of to reflect this multiplicity of interests. Instead of narrowing the journal’s focus to a single theme, we chose to embrace the range of inquisitive pursuit demonstrated by undergraduates. The works you read here characterize the best of undergraduate historical writing carried out within classes offered by the Department of History at Wyoming during the 2006-2007 academic year.

In “Toleration and Weakness: Catherine de Medici’s Effect on Sixteenth-Century France,” Ranee Savage Clark explores the life, as well as the legacy, of Catherine de Medici. Nicole Thompson investigates the history of Deadwood in “Tough, Tenacious, and Adaptive: The Story of Deadwood and its Growing Pains.” World War II is examined via the perspective of an American pilot in Ryan E. Frost’s “The Story of John Brinser: An Oral History of an American Pilot.” Finally, in a comparative book review, Kellie Rockey scrutinizes two accounts by survivors of the Holocaust, If This is a Man (Survival in Auschwitz) by Primo Levi and Speak You Also, A Survivor’s Reckoning by Paul Steinberg.

The Nu Alpha Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta is extremely pleased to finally be able to offer a forum to show off the insights of its hardworking undergraduates. This selection of papers was solicited with the assistance of faculty, but selected by students to best represent the work that we do here. It is with the greatest pleasure that I introduce this first issue of History Trails: An Undergraduate Journal of History from the University of Wyoming.

Emily J. Arendt, Editor

UW Class of 2007 and M.A. Candidate, 2009
Catherine de Medici’s Effect on Sixteenth-Century France
Ranee’ Savage

A French moralist living in the seventeenth century, François, Duc de la Rochefoucauld wrote, “Treachery is more often the effect of weakness than of a formed design.”[1] This could be true of Catherine de Medici. Though born in Italy in 1519, Catherine came to France when she was fourteen years old to marry Henri II and spent the rest of her life there. De Lamar Jensen said of her, “Catherine’s loyalty to family and friends never compromised her political dedication to the service of France.”[2] Nevertheless, in the time that she reigned over France, religious civil wars between the Catholics and Protestants tore the country apart. Henri IV, Catherine’s son-in-law, allegedly said, “[t]he length and scale of the war has so desolated the provinces of our Kingdom that most of the land is deserted and uncultivated.”[3] Catherine’s weakness became the government’s weakness. While Catherine reigned, from her husband’s death in 1559 until her own death in 1589, her actions both helped and hurt the government of France. While her dominance over her sons contributed to its strength, her toleration of the Protestants undermined and weakened the government during the years of the religious wars.

Even before Catherine’s death, the legend that Catherine was the black queen capable of unprecedented evil began to spread. Exaggerated Protestant writings in the sixteenth century held Catherine entirely liable for the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in August 1572. According to N.M. Sutherland, these “pamphleteers” established the basis for a myth that attributed more guilt and influence than Catherine was actually capable of.[4] In her historiography on Catherine de Medici, written in 1978, Sutherland stated that “the legend of her wickedness…reached its apex in the nineteenth century.”[5] Romantic writers at the turn of the century like Imbert de Saint-Amand, Henry Baird, Lady Jackson, and A.J. Grant found Catherine intolerably evil, with no excuse for her crimes. In 1886, Lady Jackson said that Catherine was “destined to bring incalculable misery to France.”[6] Even a decade later, Baird referred to Catherine as the “crafty Italian” who ignored “the true interests of her own children.”[7]

As the twentieth century wore on and more information on Catherine, particularly her letters, became available, opinions began to change. Writers were looking at her more objectively, but the views were becoming polarized. Even in the 1950s, some clung to the legend while others justified her actions because of her situation.[8] In his book, *The
Massacre of Saint Bartholomew, published in 1959, Henri Noguères spoke of Catherine as a “real ruler” with a pitiful past that had shaped her into the person she was. Published that same year in France was Jean Héritier’s biography, Catherine de Medici. In it, he painted Catherine as a very capable woman, aspiring to power on “her own credit.”

These two authors showed the leap that history had taken examining Catherine in more detail, instead of interpreting her by surface evidence only.

Still, in the 1970s there were those that refused to leave the legend behind. Sutherland called Irene Mahoney’s biography Madame Catherine, published in 1975, “retrogressive.” Though not buying entirely into the legend, Mahoney called Catherine in the conclusion of her book the “Italian shopkeeper,” a phrase reminiscent of the nineteenth-century. Nevertheless, not all writers in that decade were determined to bring Catherine down. In an article that De Lamar Jensen wrote in 1978, “Catherine de Medici and Her Florentine Friends,” he was far more sympathetic to Catherine than Mahoney, portraying Catherine as a victim of her circumstances, often alleging that the wars with the Huguenots made her “desperate.”

In the 1990s, the opinion of Catherine was much better. R.J. Knecht, who wrote a biography Catherine de’ Medici in 1998 did not ignore that Catherine had some serious lack of judgment at times, but like others, he pointed out circumstances that made it difficult for her to maintain a peaceful state in France. The twentieth-first century saw a new theme in scholarship on Catherine de Medici. Leonie Frieda published a biography, Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France in 2003; Katherine Crawford wrote about Catherine in the article “Catherine de Medicis and the Performance of Political Motherhood” in 2000; others discussed how Catherine’s femininity contributed to her ability to govern legitimately. Her legend had come full circle, and historians finally began to understand her in the context of her reign in France.

Although she became Queen in 1547, Catherine’s real reign began in 1559 after a jousting accident killed Henri II. Some historians believed that during the reign of her oldest son Francis II, Catherine was eclipsed by the Guises, but although she remained in the background, Catherine still held influence over her son. Mary Stuart said that Francis II did “nothing but what she desires.” It was Catherine’s position as a mother, according to Katherine Crawford, that allowed her to exercise this influence and made her power legitimate. Crawford wrote that Catherine based it “on her ability to utilize accepted notions of female behavior,” particularly as a mother and widow. When she was given the regency over Charles IX after Francis II died, Charles was only 10 years old. Knecht said of her
power, “she took charge of the government as effectively as if she had been king.” Catherine was very aware that the monarchy was facing troublesome times because of religious strife and weakness of her sons as kings. To combat this, Catherine found ways to protect the monarchy and keep French subjects loyal to their king. She was very aware of the Valois blood in her sons, and wanted to make sure the subjects were aware and respected the family. Shortly after Charles came to the throne, he and Catherine embarked on a trip through the kingdom so that by seeing their King, the subjects could put a real face to the monarchy. Charles was young and weak, but Catherine hoped that the journey would endear Charles to the French people.

Although she was always a central figure in the policymaking and influence, these efforts show that Catherine made sure her sons at least *seemed* in control. A gentleman who lived at court and observed Catherine, the Abbe de Brantôme, illustrated this when he wrote of how she sometimes concluded her speeches by saying, “I wish it, and the King my son wishes [it].” However, her influence was still readily apparent. During his reign, Francis began commands with the phrase, “This being the good pleasure of the Queen, my lady-mother, and I also approving of every opinion that she holdeth, am content and command that…” In Charles’ correspondence, even after his majority, his governmental, policy, and even personal letters were usually accompanied by one from Catherine. This influence was noted by the Venetian ambassador Carrero, who wrote of Charles, “[t]he decisions, however, he leaves entirely to his mother, so that never a son shewed more respect and obedience.” Catherine made other moves to strengthen the monarchy and in consequence the French government by declaring majority for Charles IX at the age of 14. Frieda said that Catherine “knew that the loyalty commanded by a monarch was far greater than that of a regent.” It was smart. Even though Charles was still quite young, Catherine hoped that “the nobles’ traditional feelings of allegiance” might help to bring peace back to France. It is ironic, but these actions and others that demonstrate Catherine’s dominance over her children also show that these same actions probably saved France from more chaos than there already was. Francis II and Charles IX were both too young and sickly to rule on their own. Carrero said of Catherine, that despite her faults, “[s]he alone has sustained the little majesty of the crown which remains.” Without her in the background, the monarchy of France may have collapsed into the hands of the Guises, or another powerful faction at court.

Catherine worked hard to strengthen her sons’ power, “traveling widely across the kingdom, often enduring physical hardship.” It is unfortunate then, that her efforts, namely in promoting peace and compromise between the
Catholics and Huguenots, also served to seriously undermine the government. In 1561, those who had committed “religious offences” since 1559 were given reprieve by Catherine and her moderate councilors. Also in 1561, The Colloquy of Poissy, which the pope opposed, sought to bring together the Catholics and Protestants to seek compromise. Catherine strongly supported this measure and worked hard to make sure it happened. When Phillip II faced religious rebellion in the Netherlands, Catherine wrote to him of the Protestants, “Take us as an example, for we have sufficiently shown, at our own cost, how others should govern themselves.” These actions and others of Catherine illustrated her opinion that reconciliation with the Protestants was the best way to reorder her kingdom.

Her policies for toleration were extremely forward thinking in the sixteenth century, when toleration was defined by the Catholic Church, whose idea of toleration was to expel heretics from Christian kingdoms. When Protestantism was on the rise in the sixteenth century, the church recalled the Inquisition to try heretics. Since the Catholic Church was strongly connected to the government, this religious system in France had the power to enforce this definition of toleration. In order to sue for peace, Catherine sought to lift the charge that the Protestants were heretics to be tried, and instead to recognize them as a religious organization. To discover why this was rejected by leaders and subjects alike, the political and religious groups of France should be analyzed. Groups such as the Catholic Church, and the views they used to create how French citizens saw the world, defined the period of the religious wars in France. Using these traditions, the people of France built their own realities of how Protestants should be treated. For many, this meant suppression and destruction.

If suppression and destruction were better than civil war, a possible way for Catherine to avoid the civil war may have been to side decisively with one faction or the other. The Protestants did not recognize that Catherine’s toleration and moderate policies toward them did not necessarily mean she agreed with them. She was interested in reconciliation for political purposes only. However, because of her actions, some Protestants even believed that she and her family would join them. Theodore de Bèze, a significant member of the Protestant church, wrote to John Calvin in Geneva, “[t]his Queen, our Queen, is better disposed towards us than she has even been.” Her actions worked to discomfit the Catholics as well. The fact that Catherine had invited Protestant delegates to the Colloquy of Poissy as good as gave them a “formal recognition” of the religion. Simply put, if Catherine had recognized only one religion and put her political backing behind only one situation, most likely with the Catholics, it may have reaffirmed what many French citizens felt was right. In turn, this action may have validated the authority of the monarchy and strengthened the government. By recognizing the Protestants as a force to be reckoned with,
Catherine’s actions and decisions of toleration instead created a third situation: one in which both religions could be recognized as truth. However, citizens in France, both Protestant and Catholic, held a fundamental belief in “[u]ne foi, un loi, un roi,” translated as “one faith, one law, one king.”[35] Catherine’s idea of two truths was unacceptable and social confusion followed. Venetian ambassador, Carrero wrote of the Catholic reactions to these policies. He said, “[t]he Catholics…maintain: if the Queen had not favored the Reformers and exalted them, they could never have achieved what they have.”[36] When Charles wrote to Spain six months after the Massacre of St. Bartholomew’s in 1572, he said, “[t]he more I sought to end the troubles in my kingdom by friendly methods, and to satisfy the Reformers, so much more did their rapacity and boldness lead them to undertakings against me.”[37]

After the Massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Day, Catherine wrote to the French ambassador in Madrid, St. Goar, “[w]e are embarked for the same happy destination as Spain.” It seemed that after the Massacre, Catherine had decided to back peddle and support the Catholics and the Catholics alone. However, her policies, though more stringent, still recognized the Protestants as a threat instead of as nonexistent. In 1576, Catherine insisted that her son Henri III, now king, end the latest religious conflict with the Protestants “no matter what the price.”[38] In 1579, she traveled throughout Protestant controlled towns in an effort to uphold order and seek out resolutions to the religious turmoil.[39]

The evidence seems to point to the conclusion that had Catherine at least expelled the Protestants from the kingdom, France may not have experienced the civil strife it did during the sixteenth century. The conclusion, however, cannot be that simple. The Protestants were a significant group of people in France who presented a problem that had to be dealt with. Henri II’s plan for dealing with the Protestants, though not as fanatical as Phillip II’s in Spain, was definitely religious oppression and persecution. His reign certainly did not face the same disorder that Catherine’s did, but Frieda stated that after he died, his “methods of repressing the new religion would no longer be effective.”[40] Even if Catherine had forced France into tolerating the Protestants and allowing them to practice their religion, Spain could not accept such a notion. De Lamar Jensen echoed this sentiment, saying, “[h]ow could [reconciliation] be achieved without bringing down the wrath of both Phillip II and the pope?”[41] Allowing Protestants to worship unmolested in her kingdom and courting Spanish favor put Catherine in a difficult situation. Spanish policy was always suppression.

Historians may never uncover many of the reasons Catherine insisted on for compromising between two uncompromising religions, even when others saw the policies were not working. There are some possibilities,
however. It is possible that Catherine recognized that wars bring men to power, not women. In an effort to keep her power in France, she may have insisted on peace. Frieda presented another possibility. She accused Catherine of a “want of imagination.”[42] Catherine did not really have any religious convictions of her own. A.J. Grant stated a hundred years earlier that she was not a “Catholic fanatic…her life was little influenced by religion.”[43] Given these characteristics is was hard for Catherine to imagine that someone would die for their religion, or imagine why the two faiths could not put aside their differences and make peace. [44]

Whatever her reasons, and despite all of her hard work, she ultimately failed France. It was said after she died that she was remembered no more than a “dead goat”[45] Considering all that she did contribute to France, it is a sorrowful conclusion to her life. M. Greengrass said in his review of Catherine de Medici, that R.J. Knecht “does not accept the revisionist picture of Catherine as the single-minded and selfless promoter of peace and reconciliation in a divided kingdom,” and nor should we.[46] It is certain that Catherine made mistakes. Though her influence in political issues during the reign of her sons certainly did France good, her devotion to “peace and reconciliation” most certainly did not.

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[5] Ibid., 45.

[23] Ibid., 145.
[26] Ibid., 173.
[29] Frieda, *Catherine de Medici*, 156.
[30] Ibid., 159.
[31] Ibid., 198.
[33] Frieda, *Catherine de Medici*, 149, 156.
[34] Ibid., 157.
[35] Ibid., 138.
[37] Ibid., 200.
[38] Frieda, *Catherine de Medici*, 331.
[39] Ibid., 339.
[40] Ibid., 92.
The alluring flow of whiskey, gold, and women! Without these elements the dream of the Wild West can never seem as entertaining. A utopia of ruggedness where men took the law into their own hands, governed themselves, and the prying eyes of government were non-existent. These ideals are mainly the work of western romanticism and John Wayne movies. Yet deep within the densely forested region of the Black Hills, South Dakota, a town was founded on these very ideals and became a metropolis of life. Yet in order to sustain its livelihood the town had to adapt. From gambling, brothels, mining, to tourism the spirit of survival existed within its people who wished to see the historical richness of their boomtown survive well into modernity. Welcome to Deadwood, the phoenix of the Black Hills.

Vice was an excellent catalyst in the creation of boomtowns. In Deadwood’s case, it was the cornerstone of its foundation. The site for the town itself provides a great tale of thievery and greed. However, the exploitation of a particular resource is essential to the creation of a boomtown. Without that resource there is little incentive for people to settle in an area. For Deadwood that exploitation primarily focused on one particular ore: gold. The discovery of this ore in the Black Hills of South Dakota was just another spark in the already ongoing gold rush in the 1800s. By the 1860s, the gold rush was dying in California and the Civil War ravaged the country and its economy. “In 1873 the country at large was suffering one of its worst ‘panics.’ It was the aftermath of the war, and in its wake came economic demoralization. There were bread lines and economic chaos.” [1]

The official discovery of gold in the Black Hills is attributed to one well known man: George Armstrong Custer. In the summer of 1874 Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer made the discovery of gold while traveling through the Black Hills. “He had been sent into this, the last unsettled mountain fastness of the Great Plains to find in the heart of the Sioux reservation a spot for a military post from which those hostile and disgruntled Indians might be controlled…” [2] Yet when Custer announced the presence of gold, there was one major problem; the gold rested on Indian land handed to the Sioux tribe by the federal government. The Fort Laramie treaties of 1851 promised the Plains Indian tribes, including the Sioux who roamed the Dakota Territory, a long-term federal subsidy in exchange for the tribe’s agreement to move into reservations. [3]

Custer’s entry into the Black Hills was in violation of the treaties but he avoided problems by validating his
entry into the land based on scientific purposes and geological study. The government made sure to make it known to the Indians that its mission was peaceful and no harm would come to them as long as they did not harm the expedition. Yet with the mere whisper of a word as luxurious as gold, the treaties themselves could not stand in the way of people trying to relieve themselves of the economic depression: “In 1874 the magic words, ‘Gold in the Black Hills,’ made many of the men who were victims of the panic, with an urgency born of necessity, join the trek westward toward the new gold country.”[4]

The race for the Black Hills by veteran and novice prospectors alike had begun. All those harboring ambition across America made their way to the Dakotas, and soon the government had its hands full. “The aggrieved Sioux, their lands invaded despite treaty guarantees, took to the warpath.”[5] Neither this nor the threat of government repercussions of violating the treaty deterred the miners’ attempts to strike it rich. Indian agents complained to the government and asked that any miner found in the territory be killed or sent to prison. Colonel George W. Stokes wrote, “A squadron of the Third Cavalry was sent north from Fort Russell, near Cheyenne, to round up the prospectors and escort them to Fort Laramie on parole. If found in the Black Hills again, they were to be sent to the military prison at Fort Russell.”[6] Many miners were discovered and taken out of the territory by the army, but the government was looking for ways of its own to revise the treaty and open up the Dakota Territory for further federal development. “So in a very few months, from a quiet sanctified realm of Indian Gods the Black Hills changed into a simmering cauldron of pushing, struggling, humanity.”[7]

The story of who was the founder of Deadwood is clouded in mystery as is the case of many boomtowns. (In fact, the more mystery surrounding a town the better its appeal and the more exaggerated its stories become.) Many miners were locating themselves within the area and all of them had a story to tell. The most commonly accepted founder of Deadwood was a miner named John B. Pearson; however, Pearson was accompanied by at least six other miners in August 1875. The area that Pearson and his crew started prospecting for gold was in a narrow canyon later to be called Deadwood Gulch because of the numerous dead trees surrounding it. Pearson’s group was not the only set of miners staking their claims at this time but they are accredited as the first. Also in 1875 a mining town called Custer City developed in the Black Hills but soon died, which would spell a big boom for the Deadwood Gulch area. The estimated population of Custer City, ranging from 15,000 to 25,000, packed up their supplies and moved to a new camp: Deadwood Gulch.[8]

By December 1875 most of the claims within Deadwood Gulch were taken; any latecomers had to buy their
claims from previous miners. William Lardner, a recorder for the Lost Mining District, recorded all the miners’ claims in the area. “On 1 January 1876 a party composed of J.J. Williams, W.H. Babcock, Eugene Smith, and Mr. Jackson arrived and located claims.”[9] Williams claimed $27,000 for his first mine and claimed another $35,000 from another mine he purchased. Upon this discovery the rush to Deadwood grew rapidly. Many camps and mines sprang up around the area. Men from all types of backgrounds and characters migrated to Deadwood Gulch to produce an element of lawlessness. “Thousands of others followed the miners-the Chinese and their laundries, the storekeepers, the lawyers, the lumbermen, the girls of the lower end of town, the respectable families, and the shysters who saw a chance to make a fortune with their wits instead of their hands.”[10]

As important as the miners were in developing Deadwood, it was not just young white males that kept the town alive and vibrant. “It was a diverse mass of humanity that breathed life into the cluster of booming mining camps that overwhelmed Deadwood Gulch in its initial years of settlement.”[11] There were Germans, French, Scottish, Cornish, Jews, and some African Americans sprinkled into the population. The most dominant of these ethnic groups was the Chinese who built their own section within Deadwood into the largest self-ruled Chinatown east of San Francisco.

Initially the influx of Chinese immigrants into the Black Hills generated a lot of resentment from white settlers, especially when Chinese miners appeared to be more successful then their white counterparts. Racism towards the Chinese was another major problem. “Attorney Henry Frawley defended a white client who had murdered a Chinaman by alleging that there was no law against it, and he urged the judge to fine the murderer twenty-five dollars for ‘cruelty to animals’ instead. The judge, apparently anxious to impose some punishment less than a capital one, agreed.”[13] Tensions rose and aggression toward the Chinese community resulted in violent attacks and explosions of opium dens.

A prominent member within Deadwood’s Chinese community, a man named Wing, sent a letter to the Black Hills Daily Times to help ease the tensions. Wing, also in charge of a sect of a violent secret society called Tongs, proposed a cooperation between the two communities to “stop such influx of my people as shall tend to interfere with the labor of white men in the mines in this country, and engage that no immigration of my people shall visit the Hills, except to engage in the lighter occupations of washing, cooking and house servants.”[14] In 1878 the Caucasian League was created. The main goal of the league was to “protect the interest of white miners…and to prevent the employment of the Celestials.”[15] Not much came from the League and considering how cheap Chinese labor as well as Chinese businesses were, the Chinese were tolerated and, in fact, were an essential part of the town.

The Chinese community went into businesses such as laundries, saloons, restaurants, inns, and even mining.
The Chinese understood the importance of keeping close relations with the white community; they were given the same protection and depended on the American judicial system for justice. They participated in American holidays such as the Fourth of July and gained the respect of some of their white neighbors. “The adoption of some elements of the dominant culture was another way to improve race relations. While keeping their ethnic identity to some degree, the Chinese conscientiously embraced American culture by living, acting, and playing like their neighbors.”[16]

The Chinese community had their own power struggle occurring within their district; prior to 1879 it, too, was a place of lawlessness and violence. “Secret societies called ‘Tongs’ fought for control of their people and the opium dens doubtless contributed to much of the lawlessness there.”[17] The mystery surrounding the death of Yellow Doll remains unsolved to this day. Little is known of the woman called Yellow Doll other then she arrived in Deadwood in 1876. She was an Oriental charmer, also known as a prostitute, and lived a secluded life in luxury. “An unknown axe-wielding assailant hacked to bits the beautiful Yellow Doll…”[18] Her burial remained a secret but the leaders of the community gave her a luxurious funeral and her killer was never revealed.

A big problem within Deadwood was the issue of claim jumping. A claim jumper was a group or individual who either killed or drove off the original owner of a claim then took that claim as their own. However, no one owned the mines legally. The land itself was owned by the local Sioux, and the miners were violating the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty. The government during the late nineteenth century was trying to persuade the Plains tribes to give up their claim to the area and move farther north but the tribes were hostile and resistant:

Under the law, Deadwood Gulch was still located within a Federal Indian Reservation, and as such, there were no rights to title or claim by non-Indians of any of the real estate along the creeks. Warranty or Grant Deeds at that time were not worth the paper they were written on. Rights were effectively for use and occupancy only as granted though the formation of the original Deadwood Creak Lost Mining District recorded agreements. There was not even a legal statute available for enforcement of the District.[19]

Regardless of the constant threat of attacks by Indians and the lawless ruthlessness influencing the Gulch’s inhabitants, more and more people flowed into Deadwood Gulch. The lure and excitement of gold, adventure, and a new life filled with economic prosperity was too tempting to resist. A flourishing mining camp was soon built and named Deadwood after the Gulch in which it resided.[20]

Col. George W. Stokes gave up his job at the Denver newspaper to try his luck at gold mining. Upon his arrival in Deadwood in 1875, he was shocked to see the constant activity surrounding Deadwood. “A thousand men had beaten us to Deadwood. Everybody lived in tents or in wickiups made of boughs or poles with dirt thrown up around them. These were only temporary lodges, however.”[21] By 1876 Deadwood’s population swelled to an estimated five
to ten thousand people. Most of the miner’s dwellings were makeshift tents as people anxiously awaited the construction of a lumber mill. “Three whipsaw outfits came into the Deadwood area by May 1876…and with the arrival of steam-powered mills in the summer of 1876 over thirty thousand board feet of lumber a day was produced…..[22] Now the building of a more permanent infrastructure began. “To accommodate the influx of new merchants eager to supply the masses of illegal trespassers with goods and services, a new Main Street eventually developed.”[23] Stores, saloons, brothels, inns and living quarters grew rapidly along Deadwood’s Main Street. As one commentator for the *Ladies’ Illustrated Newspaper* observed of Deadwood’s streets “…The buildings which grace its sides are a curiosity in modern architecture, and their light construction is a standing insult to every wind that blows.”[24] Life was full of surprises for Deadwood’s inhabitants in 1876. George Leeman was only two years old when he first arrived in Deadwood with his family. One day while shooting at chipmunks with slingshots, George Leeman and a friend were able to hit one. The chipmunk went dashing into a hole within the rocks. George ran over and stuck his hand in the hole and pulled out “a wad of something tightly wrapped in a rodent nibbled red bandana handkerchief. It turned out to be $800 in bills.”[25] With the influx of people hoping to further their ambitions in Deadwood, it was crucial for the town to develop a way for its inhabitants to know what was going on in their new town. On June 8, 1876, the *Black Hills Pioneer* newspaper printed and distributed its first issue. Pioneer John S. McClintock, who arrived in Deadwood in April of 1876, remembered “quite a number of us gathered there while preparations for getting out the first issue were being made…The first, as well as many succeeding issues, was readily sold at twenty-five cents each.”[26] The development of a newspaper not only symbolized the growth of a mining town but also helped to better organize the community. “To be a newspaper editor is to be an optimist, else the constant exposure to the follies and foibles of mankind would drive the editors to despair; this ingrained optimism must be the reason that so many newspapers began in gold rush towns.”[27] Deadwood’s optimist was a man named A.W. Merrick, editor for the newly formed *Black Hills Pioneer*. A newspaper reflects the attitudes and moods of its town and the *Black Hills Pioneer* was no different. As chaos and rumors flew up and down Main Street, the columns of its newspaper were also affected, adding to the growing list of Deadwood’s tall tales. One example is the tale of a miner who actually lost his mine due to its hidden location. “A prospector recently in from Bear Lodge Mountains says the company he was with found dirt that yielded seven cents to the pan. The miners now in that country are hunting for a little stone cabin in the mouth of a gulch which contains rich placer mines. The Old prospector who erected the cabin in question is now unable to find it,
as it is located in a broken country and in a very deep ravine.”[28] There has never been a report of finding this so-called cabin built on top of ground rich with gold. (This legend still remains today and has lead many a miner and historian on a wild goose chase, yet adds to the allure and mystery of Deadwood.)

Attractions and entertainment are a vital source to sustaining life in any town and played an important role for Deadwood. “Deadwood claimed to have more places of entertainment than any other town of its size in the country, and the anecdotes involving its state—both legitimate and illegitimate—were legion.”[29] Not only did it help to separate people from their earnings but it also added to the stories of Deadwood being a wild town. The first dance hall or what was commonly called the “hurdy gurdy house,” opened in May 1876. However, according to McClintock, it was short lived as the infamous Gem Theatre owned and operated by the nefarious Al Swearengen who McClintock describes as “dissolute and degraded” quickly took over as the main source for local entertainment. Regardless of the proprietor’s character, the Gem Theatre quickly became the star attraction of Deadwood. It embodied the very lawless spirit of its host and was often the scene of much violence, moral decay, drunkenness, and all around wild fun in Deadwood:

On one occasion as I was passing up the street, I heard a great clash of voices and a shot fired. I waited until others had rushed in and following them, I beheld a man lying on the floor with a bullet hole clear through his head back of his eyes. The woman ‘Tricksie’ had grabbed a pistol while he was beating her and turned the tables on him. A doctor came and ran a probe through his head. However, there were no brains, at least in that section of his skull.[32]

By 1877 there were more than seventy five saloons in Deadwood and, therefore, public drunkenness was a very common problem. Gambling was another form of common recreation and profit for Deadwood. “Scores if not hundreds of professional gamblers came to Deadwood to work the free-milling pocket deposits of gold dust to be found on the honest prospector looking for entertainment and relaxation.”[33]

There is no question that gold was the staple of survival for Deadwood. Without the gold rush there would not have been a town. Silver, coal, copper, tin, and an assortment of other minerals were also discovered and mined throughout the Black Hills. “Gold, however, was the mainstay and substance of Deadwood’s mineral prosperity. Very few mines were actually located inside the city limits…but those mines looked to Deadwood for supplies, financiers, and entertainment.”[35] The Manuel brothers, Moses and Fred, discovered a bonanza on April 9, 1876. Later named the Homestake Claim, this rich source of gold quartz mining became a vital source of wealth for Deadwood and a life preserver during the bust periods. “In June, 1877 the Homestake was sold to George Hearst for
$70,000 and thus began the celebrated Homestake Mining Co. [36] Hearst was methodical and very shrewd in economic matters. He immediately underwent negotiations to purchase all the claims surrounding the Homestake, had stamp mills built in California and shipped to Deadwood, and began his gold monopoly within the Black Hills. Hearst became the symbol of progress within the Black Hills. In less then two years the Homestake had 500 employees which would accelerate to 1,900 by the 1890s. [37] The Homestake provided employment and revenues to Deadwood and would be one of the biggest gold mines in the West. “The outstanding mine of the Black Hills, the one which has consistently grown in production and value until it has become the greatest low grade ore mine in the world, is the Homestake.” [38]

Without this rich vein Deadwood could not have survived. When all the easily attainable placer gold was collected a lot of miners left thinking there was no gold left within the area. Yet it was within the ability of the Homestake Mine to dig deeply into the earth to obtain the much coveted mineral. “By 1900 it had produced nearly sixty million dollars in gold, and by 1924 had accounted for approximately 90 percent of the total of more then $230,000,000 taken out of the Black Hills since 1876.” [39]

With vice prevalent in a lawless town, violence is sure to follow and Deadwood had its fair share of violence and rough characters. And like many starting mining towns, a lot of the first newcomers were men of ill character. The first recorded murder was of a man named Jack Hinch of Gayville. Hinch accused two men of cheating while playing a game of poker. These same men then shot and stabbed Hinch and fled to Wyoming Territory. They were later apprehended by companions of Hinch and a U.S. Marshal and brought to trial in Gayville since Deadwood did not have any legal status. The town was built illegally on property that was not theirs but the Sioux’s. The men were found guilty of only assault and battery, released, and were never seen again. “In his book, McClintock documented 97 murders in the first three years (1876-1879) of the settlement of the Northern Hills. Although Indians were often blamed for many murders, the white gold-seekers were efficient at killing each other off…” [40] Historian Watson Parker estimates in his book, Deadwood the Golden Years, that “murders during the gold rush days of the 1870s, ran about eight times higher then the present-day national average: thirty-four murders in the gold rush years 1876 to 1879…” [41] Yet Deadwood’s resident pioneer, McClintock, painted a different picture of the inhabitants of Deadwood. Not only did he state the town was not as violent as people wanted to believe but there was an unwritten code of ethics among them. “[I]t was generally understood that each person was accorded the privilege of being a law unto himself, in so far as his own personal rights and habits were concerned; provided, however, that such rights and
habits were not unduly exercised…[42] One of the most famous murders that placed Deadwood was the murder of Wild Bill Hickok by Jack McCall at the No. 10 Saloon. Not only did this help mark Deadwood for tourism later on but it also marked the beginning of the end of lawlessness in Deadwood.

Around July 12, 1876, James “Wild Bill” Butler Hickok accompanied by long time friend Charlie “Colorado Charlie” Utter, who was looking to set up a pony express between Deadwood and Cheyenne, arrived. Hickok rode into Deadwood “intending to make some quick money in the boomtown…He was little interested in placer mining and spent the majority of his time gambling.”[43] Unfortunately for Hickok, the less virtuous inhabitants were unaware of his intentions. Wild Bill was well known as a man killer, civil war soldier, former lawman, and one of the deadliest gunmen in the West. “Wild Bill’s reputation as the tough lawman of Hays City and Abilene most likely preceded him to the mining camps. He was probably the number one potential candidate for the position of any such job employment activities.”[44] McClintock, who himself offered a glimpse of his own uneasiness at having Wild Bill in town wrote that “from my point of view as an everyday observer in those memorable days of ’76, while there was no question but what the city of Deadwood was at that time in need of better local government, it was not in need of a notorious man-killer as peace officer.”[45]

On August 1, 1876, Hickok was playing poker with McCall who ended the night stating he was penniless. Wild Bill offered McCall some loose change to buy a meal. McCall refused and the night ended with no altercation between the two. The following day at 3 p.m., McCall entered the No. 10 Saloon where Hickok was engaged in poker with some other gentlemen with his back to the front door. Why he had his back to the door when it was rumored that Wild Bill always had a custom of keeping his back to a wall is not known. McCall made his way to Wild Bill’s blindside, pulled out a pistol and aimed for the back of Hickok’s head. He fired a single shot shouting “Damn you, take that!”[46] Wild Bill remained still for a moment before falling to the ground as the bullet entered the back of his head and exited out of his right cheek. “From his nerveless fingers spilled his cards: the Ace of Spades, the Ace of Clubs, two black eights, Clubs and Spades, and the Jack of Diamonds. Ever afterward they would be known as ‘Aces and Eights-The Dead Man’s Hand.’”[47] McCall quickly ran out the No. 10 Saloon and ran for the first horse he saw; unfortunately for him the owner had loosened the saddle and Jack McCall fell to the ground. McCall was apprehended within the town (the exact location is disputed) and a massive funeral procession was held for Wild Bill.

The winds of change swirled throughout the stunned streets of Deadwood after Hickok’s death. More prominent members of society were arriving in Deadwood and many were concerned at the direction their new town
was going. In order for Deadwood to have any legal standing they had to be recognized by the federal government as being a town. More importantly, town lots could not be sold legally without a federal grant of land. “The murder created a great stir, an unusual sensation amongst the populace, probably more pronounced then would have been the case had Wild Bill been the murderer and Jack McCall the victim…In accordance with public sentiment, a mass meeting was held for the purpose of deciding what action should be taken in the killing of Wild Bill.” While the inhabitants acknowledged they were trespassers in accordance to federal law and thus had no legal jurisdiction or status, something had to be done about McCall. A trial was hastily put together for McCall, whose defense was to claim that Hickok had killed his brother. McCall was acquitted and told to leave Deadwood never to return again. After McCall’s departure, an investigation by Charlie Utter and friends revealed McCall never had a brother. He boasted of his killing while traveling to Laramie, Wyoming, which was overheard by a lawman. He was arrested again, tried in Yankton, South Dakota, found guilty and was hanged on March 1, 1877. He was buried with the rope still tied around his neck.

Toward the spring of 1877, the town decided to organize a provisional city government with a city council to start modeling Deadwood into a more respectable town worthy of being the center of Black Hills’ activity. Prominent members within the town were elected into official positions. A local merchant by the name of E.B. Farnum was elected mayor and prominent merchant, Seth Bullock, as sheriff. “That first year Sheriff Bullock cleaned up Deadwood without gunning down offenders. It was no easy job, especially when there was no jail except an abandoned mining tunnel or a dirt basement.” Bullock was the perfect man for the job and had ample experience from previous experience as a sheriff in Helena, Montana. Bullock made a considerable difference in changing the rough atmosphere of the town. According to the May 6, 1877 edition of the Black Hills Times,

It is generally acknowledged that great credit is due Sheriff Bullock for the efficient manner which he conducts the business of his office. In capturing eight prisoners, he has shown a detective skill that is truly wonderful and proves fitness for the position he holds. It is unanimously asserted by the prisoners that his kindness toward them lessens the severe penalty of their close confinement.

The dynamics of the people were changing in Deadwood, and the attitudes of these people spread throughout the town and soon Deadwood adapted to the conditions needed to ensure its survival and well being. Deadwood was the symbol of good prosperity, perseverance, and its population thought the good times would never end. “This gradual transition from a lawless to a more healthful and law respecting status was due largely to a change in the people, who very quickly recognized that they were now living under and subject to a legal form of government, and that their
actions would be judged in accordance with the newly established laws of the land.” With a provisional
government formed, many ordinances were passed dealing with the establishment of medical facilitie, sanitation,
collection of revenues for the town by selling licenses to businesses, and appointment of fire wardens.

By 1879, Deadwood’s wild beginnings slowly faded and gave way to a new age of order and prosperity that
faced adversity time and again. Adrian Parshall, a young gentleman hoping to accumulate wealth by becoming a clerk
for the First National Bank in Deadwood, reached town in early 1879. He left a young lady, Annie Kilbourne, in
Michigan who he hoped to marry as soon as he had built their house and saved enough funds to bring her over by
stage coach. In one of his letters to Annie he commented about the general feel of the town: “I live very moderate for
to be out of debt is to be a free man. I think this is bound to be a good country. It is improving all the time…Capital is
being put in to some extent.” Parshall’s confidence in his new town soon evaporated later on that year. It has been
said that all cities of vice will succumb to God’s fiery wrath. Deadwood was no exception.

The great fire of September 1879 was a devastating blow to Deadwood’s development to normalcy. Parshall
wrote his beloved,

You have no doubt heard before this that Deadwood is in ashes. The whole business portion of the town
was burned the morning of the 26. A few residences on the outskirts of the town saved, ours among the
number. So many have lost all they owned and are homeless. It seems almost selfish to think I lost nothing
expect about $50-$100 worth of clothes. Graves and Curtis had just finished a fine 2 story brick business house
which was lost with everything in it. Bank saved some things. Stebbins Post & Co. lost a fine brick block not quite
completed. About 2 ½ millions of property burned in less than 2 hours. Everyone trying to rebuild we are very
busy. Will write as soon as possible.

Despite the overwhelming losses affecting a stunned populace, the tenacity to survive prevailed yet again in
Deadwood. The city soon began reconstruction, before the embers could cool, and was given a new nickname, “City of
Sin and Ashes. The sin had been present from the beginning; the ashes symbolized the burned out passions of the
undisciplined gold seekers.” Bank vaults were able to preserve their contents which greatly aided the town in
rebuilding. Troops were sent to ensure no looting, and although rioting occurred within Deadwood’s streets, there was
little need for their presence. “Everybody pitched in to rebuild and there was little gouging and profiteering by those
who had supplies or property left to sell.” Within six months Deadwood was rebuilt and conducting business as
usual. The Chinese community also prospered after the fire. “They rebuilt their homes and businesses, electing their
own mayor and council. A Chinese police force and fire department was established.” Unfortunately for
Deadwood, the fire of 1879 was only the beginning of turbulent times for its inhabitants.

Deadwood’s population, according to the 1880 census had lessened to about 3,777 but was still considered the
largest town in three counties. Many of the earlier settlers and miners were temporary and moved on while the permanent group of settlers created stability. Mining was becoming more difficult and frustrating. Most of the easily attainable gold had been taken; the rest resided deep within the earth requiring extensive mining to be able to obtain it. The gold rush was over and the miners that stayed had families, so “…permanent buildings and family life-were the prime civilizing influences.” The gold rush may have been fading in the 1880s but Deadwood activity was not. The inhabitants turned their sights to new horizons and focused on bringing other institutions into the town. Yet nature continued to test Deadwood’s spirit. On May 16, 1883, a flood ripped through Deadwood causing devastation and nearly ended the town. “It was estimated the rampaging waters caused over $300,000 in damage and a number of lives were lost.” McClintock wrote about the flood in his memoirs: “All bridges were swept away, the long, heavy wrought iron beams were twisted out of shape and carried down stream…The body of Mr. Chandler was found buried beneath a gravel bed in the fourth ward…Mrs. Chandler’s body was found in a drift of lumber and other debris in the first ward.” However, the flood was a mixed blessing as it marked the end for the various toll roads and allowed the opportunity to build a highway system. The inhabitants of Deadwood immediately began rebuilding their torn city just as they had done after the great fire of 1879.

The 1880s also marked the development of a railroad system in Deadwood, the first of its kind in the area. Originally the railroad developers were not interested in the Black Hills. However, “once long-term economic possibilities for the area became apparent, several companies began planning to build lines into the southwestern Dakota Territory.” Only it would not be an outside company bringing in the railroads, it would be Deadwood’s own local company, the Homestake Mining Co. In 1881, Superintendent Samuel McMaster “supervised the grading and laying of rails for a narrow gauge line about fourteen miles out into the timber south of Lead.” The locomotive itself was brought up from Pierre and was up and running by the beginning of December 1881. The railroad mainly transported lumber for the mine and occasionally carried passengers. By 1889, two more railroad companies constructed railways into town that specifically functioned in transporting supplies and passengers. Deadwood was adapting into modernity and continued to be the metropolis of the Black Hills. The 1890s seemed to be a shining era for Deadwood. “They now had electric lights, phones, a water system, and some of the streets were macadamized with gold and silver pulp (tailings).” The newly developed railroads increased wholesale and commercial businesses by bringing efficiency in speed and communication. “By 1898
Deadwood had 11 restaurants and seven of those were operated by Chinese proprietors. In addition to the other businesses there were 22 saloons, a cigar factory, seltzer and soda water company, Western Union telegraph and the Black Hills Steam Laundry.

Businesses were booming all over Deadwood and construction was at its highest. The Deadwood of the 1890s may have dressed and seemed more civilized than in the 1870s but was still considered wilder than most other towns. “Gambling and prostitution continued in full force throughout the decade and arguments were still sometimes settled with guns or fists instead of through the developing legal system.” The instruments of vice had always been a great source of wealth to the town. There were numerous attempts made to crack down on the saloons within Deadwood, as early as 1889. “[T]he South Dakota legislature, which in 1889 enacted prohibition law which seems to have been distinguished for the degree to which it was ineffective, for most of the state’s judges could neither understand or enforce it.” Deadwood’s saloons kept running well into the twentieth century.

The 1890s also brought resurgence in the already wealthy mining industry with the integration of the cyanide and chlorination process which made seemingly worthless ore profitable to mine. The mining of these various minerals contributed to the stability of the mining community within the Black Hills. The first process introduced was the chlorination process in which “pulverized and roasted quartz was placed in tanks and allowed to steep in chlorine gas, which drew the sulphides from the gold; the gold was then leached out of the mixture with water.” The process was not dangerous; however the chlorine batches could only be used once, and thus was expensive. The cyanide process “recovered gold by leaching pulped ore with a solution of potassium cyanide followed by water, which precipitated the gold on sheets of zinc or aluminum.”

The arrival of the twentieth century was a trying time for Deadwood especially for its liquor, gambling, and prostitution establishments. By 1917 the saloons were closed due to national prohibition. However, that did not stop alcohol production as bootlegging was occurring throughout the Black Hills. “Prohibition, plus the vigorous suppression of gambling, was a deathblow to Deadwood’s badlands, and when the oil fields of Salt Creek, Wyoming, attracted the last of the professional sinners, that part of Deadwood’s industry and businesses devoted to wild life departed westward...” By 1950 gambling was also shut down and even though prostitution was never really outlawed, the loss of drinking and gambling took a heavy toll on the institution. Nature itself was ready to strike again with a series of floods, fires, and blizzards. Starting in 1949, a major blizzard unleashed 43 inches of snow in a matter
of two days, leaving the town isolated from the rest of the world for a week. Railroads were unable to get into the
town, businesses were stagnant, and schools were closed. In 1959 another fire roamed through Deadwood and
destroyed its City Hall resulting in the loss of many historical documents. In 1965 Deadwood was once again hit with
another massive flood. “The flood was the worst natural disaster to threaten Deadwood since the fire of 1959…No
lives were lost and only minor injuries reported. The flood caused estimated $5 million damage to buildings, bridges,
and roads in the county. The cities of Deadwood and Spearfish were the hardest hit with each sustaining over $330,000
in damages.”

The Homestake Mining Co. continued well into the twentieth century, and despite the Depression of 1930s it
continued to hire new employees. “The mine was making a profit even though it was hiring new workers and
expanding underground and surface facilities.” However, by the Second World War the government ordered its
closure. “Miners either looked elsewhere for work or joined the armed forces. Only a skeleton crew remained to keep
the mine ready for reopening after the war.” The mine opened again after the war. Numerous other problems
occurred for the Mine, brought on by inflation and labor strikes, but much like Deadwood it pulled through and
continued to be a major source of revenue for the town. “Deadwood continued to thrive after the stock market crash-
partly because Homestake was an economic ‘gold mine’ during those years and partly because, in addition to being
still a trade center for the area, it was also ‘the fun place to be.’” The Homestake Mine was finally closed in
2002.

Deadwood however had another form of revenue to keep it going: its history. “Deadwood’s future is based on
its past. It is one city that has made the most of its reputation…During the first 25 years of its existence, Deadwood
didn’t need to go out of its way to attract publicity for everything that happened in the roaring mining camp made
headlines in the eastern newspapers.” By 1985 Deadwood was becoming a ghost town, yet its inhabitants
stubbornly held on to their historic town. Dick Kitchen, writer of “Ghost Towns that Lost” had this to say about
Deadwood: “Hardly regarded as ‘ghost towns’ by their citizenry, the historic cities of Deadwood and Lead in the Black
Hills certainly lay claim to having once possessed the state’s most colorful residents. Calamity Jane, Deadwood Dick,
and Wild Bill Hickok added atmosphere to what might have been just two more gold mining towns.” Its past and
the colorful people that inhabited it would result in a new boom for Deadwood unbeknownst to them.

Starting in November 1989 the casinos reopened their doors in Deadwood, South Dakota. “Gambling would
not only help fill state coffers but would be used primarily for the moral upright purpose of physically restoring the declining mining and tourist town to its late nineteenth century heyday…[81] Gaming also helped to establish jobs and brought more tourists traveling through the Black Hills. With the rapid increase of tourism Deadwood used its gambling revenues to improve its infrastructure by building new parking facilities and infrastructure, “including sewer and water mains, street brickling, lighting, a new fire station, and restored buildings for the City Hall and visitors’ centers…”[82] The town itself saw an increase in property value and a decrease in taxation. “By the time gambling returned to Deadwood, the Historic Preservation Commission had a list of projects that it thought would take 40 years to finance. In 5 years enough money poured into its coffers to pay for most of them.”[83] Gambling alone would not be the sole reason for Deadwood’s boom. The twenty-first century brought about another boom through the use of media.

In 2004 HBO released a TV series titled “Deadwood” where the wild history of the town’s beginnings in 1876 was reenacted. “Like the gambling itself, the television series turned out to be a far bigger hit than anyone could have anticipated.”[84] This show would result in a massive resurgence of interest into the history of the town. “The initial effect of ‘Deadwood’ could be measured in visits to the Adams Museum & House’s website…before the show aired, there were 80,000 hits. After the first few episodes the number shot up to 6.6 million. Sales of history books in the museum bookstore rose from $31,000 in 2003 to $68,000 in 2004.”[85]

Deadwood was a product of a gold rush in the 1870s and became a major boom town within the Black Hills, like so many other towns that sprang up during this period. Mining was essential to its beginnings and the discovery of the Homestake Claim would secure its future well into the 21st century. However it was not just mining alone that maintained life within the town. Events in 1876 were crucial to its survival, as the lawlessness of the town and the mixture of colorful and infamous characters helped put Deadwood on the map for excitement. Vices such as liquor, gambling, and prostitution also gave it an allure and kept Main Street alive with people from all walks of life. The massive immigration of Chinese settlers helped its growth with their opium dens and competitive desire to give the cheapest business anywhere. The tough nature of the town would continue well throughout the century, and despite the massive natural disasters that rampaged throughout the town, the tenacity of its people persevered. Other boomtowns dwindled in the face of such adversity yet Deadwood rebuilt itself time and again. Now in the twenty-first century, all that hard work has paid off. Its rich history once again enables Deadwood to rise from the ashes and it is alive and well, experiencing a second boom in tourism.
[7] Driscoll, Seventy Years, 12.
[9] Parker, Deadwood the Golden Years, 16. The number of people that relocated to Deadwood from Custer City is disputed. Other sources claim it was only 7,000 however there was no census taken at this time.
[12] Ibid., 36.
[13] Parker, Deadwood the Golden Years, 146.
[16] Ibid., 38.
[22] Parker, Deadwood the Golden Years: 27.
[27] Parker, Deadwood the Golden Years, 82.
[29] Parker, Deadwood the Golden Years, 172.
[30]
McClintock, Pioneer Days, 65.

[31] Ibid., 69.
[32] Ibid., 70.
[33] Parker, Deadwood the Golden Years, 189.
[34] Ibid., 39.
[35] Ibid., 39.
[36] Lee, Gold-Gals-Guns-Gut, 18
[38] McClintock, Pioneer Days, 235.
[40] Rezatto, Mount Mariah, 18.
[41] Parker, Deadwood the Golden Years, 207
[47] Rosa, They Called Him Wild Bill, 309.
[54] Ibid., September 28th 1879.
[57] Lee, Gold-Gals-Guns-Guts, 37.
[58] Ibid., 103
[59] Ibid., 123.
[60] Ibid., 110.
[63] Ibid., 117.
[64] Ibid., 142.
[65] Ibid., 167.
Ibid., 143.

[67] Parker, *Deadwood the Golden Years*, 211.

[68] Ibid., 47.


[70] Ibid., 197.

[71] Parker, *Deadwood the Golden Years*, 212.

[72] Ibid., 212. According to the census of 1910 the population went from 3,600 to 2,400 by 1920 but Watson also attributes this to the First World War.


[74] Ibid., 214.

[75] Ibid., 197.

[76] Ibid., 197.

[77] Ibid., 246.

[78] Banks, “Deadwood South Dakota,” 103


[82] Ibid., 119.


[84] Ibid., 59.

[85] Ibid., 59.
World War II:

September 1st, 1939, marked the beginning of the Second World War in Europe as Nazi Germany invaded Poland. Displaying to the world their superior new Blitzkrieg tactics, the Third Reich defeated Polish forces in a matter of days. Soon after, hostilities erupted in Scandinavia during which Germany attempted to secure its northern flank. Preceding Germany’s next move westward into France, many in the west called the conflict in Europe a “phony war”. This temporary sense of denial was quickly eliminated by a massive invasion of France beginning on May 10th, 1940. The French military, the largest standing army in Europe at the time, could not hold back the German Blitzkrieg. The German Army, or Wehrmacht, routed the British and French ground troops, forcing them to the sea. This resulted in the miracle of Dunkirk, an evacuation of several hundred thousand Allied soldiers to Great Britain [1].

Hitler realized that his armored units could not cross the English Channel until air superiority had been obtained. Thus, he looked to the commander of the Luftwaffe, Herman Goering, to assault the British mainland through the air. The Battle of Britain ensued and lasted until the winter of 1940 [2]. The German command cancelled Operation Sea Lion, a planned cross-channel invasion, and focused on their up and coming invasion of the Soviet Union launched June 22nd, 1941.

The year 1942 saw the peak of Axis power in Europe. The German armies were standing before the gates of Moscow in the East, and had virtually complete control of Western Europe. Soviet leaders were begging London and Washington D.C. for a second front in the west in order to relieve the pressure of the oncoming Wehrmacht. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill personally flew to Moscow to assure Joseph Stalin of British and American resolve. Churchill argued that the Anglo-American armies were not strong enough at this point to make an effective invasion of the European continent, despite Stalin’s relentless accusation of cowardice. The mood quickly changed when Churchill described a plan of persistent bombing of the Third Reich’s industry and civilian population. This coupled with Operation Torch, an invasion of North Africa, would constitute the second front which Churchill promised [3].

The United States had not officially joined the war in Europe until Hitler declared war on the U.S. following the
Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. However, the United States by this point had already been “a participant in the war, although on a limited basis.”[4] “Billy” Mitchell and “Hap” Arnold both played instrumental roles in the expansion of U.S. airpower during the buildup and initial phase of the war.[5] Once American war planners decided on the Germany First policy, it was outlined to “apply airpower for the breakdown of the industrial and economic structure of Germany.”[6] The 8th Air Force was established in Great Britain; this brought many American aircraft and pilots to the war front while many more were being equipped and trained back in the United States. It was at this time that John Brinser entered the service.

Training:

“Well, we can start out back in October of nineteen hundred and forty-two,” his story began[7]. John grew up in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, and dropped out of high school at a mere seventeen years old in order to join the service. “I was just a kid,” he told me[8]. After completing basic training, John went on to aircraft maintenance school in Amarillo, Texas, where he gained mechanical skills and learned how to pack parachutes. He worked primarily on B-17’s which began John’s lifelong affection for the aircraft. After six months there, John entered aviation cadet school to become a pilot in San Antonio, Texas. After nine weeks, John traveled to Bonham, Texas, where he learned about becoming an officer and received his primary flight training. John’s first solo flight was in a PT-19, a World War I era biplane.

Brinser continued his training on newer and bigger aircraft at Perrin Field in Sherman, Texas. During a training exercise, he had a mid-air collision with another trainer aircraft. The instructor flying with John told him to bail out. “So they pulled the latch and the whole top of the aircraft where the pilots sat blew off. And then we climbed out onto the wing, and then jumped.”[9] This was the first of two times John would ever have to use a parachute. “I jumped stiff-legged, and I cracked a couple of ankles.”[10]

John then received advanced training in both single and twin engine aircraft. On July 8th, 1944, he graduated. “And that was what made me a pilot.”[11] He was a 2nd Lieutenant. From there, John endured four months of navigational training before entering B-17 transition. Fulfilling his lifelong dream, John was finally in the left seat of the great “Flying Fortress”. He learned to maneuver the B-17, a four-engine aircraft with a vast wingspan of over one hundred feet. Afterward, John went to Kearney, Nebraska, for combat crew staging and assignment. Here, John was introduced to 1st Lt. Jonathan K. Shafer. Brinser and Shafer were both B-17 pilots, and they met the eight remaining
members of their crew. John remembers participating in practice bombing missions up over the northern part of Wyoming before embarking on his flight over the Atlantic Ocean and into the war. From here John and his nine fellow crewmembers flew towards Bangor, Maine. Their B-17, coined the Jeanette Naomi, made a short stop in order for the crew to visit family before going overseas. John got to spend a few precious days with his family before entering the European onslaught. “Then we went to Bangor, then from Bangor to Greenland, then Greenland to Iceland, and Iceland to England.” John and his crew believed that they were going into the 8th Air Force. But after being in Great Britain for only a week, they got orders to fly to North Africa. Once in Tunisia, Africa, the Jeanette Naomi participated in a single bombing mission before receiving orders to join the 15th Air Force. 

Flying in the 15th:

The 15th Air Force originally had been established in Italy in late 1943 after British and American ground forces forged through heavily guarded defensive positions on the Italian peninsula. This campaign had come by way of North Africa, through Sicily, and into Italy. This new airfield gave Allied bombers access to targets deep within Hitler’s Reich.

The crew of the Jeanette Naomi became very close over the next couple months. John’s crew gave him the nickname “Smiling Jack”, or “Jack” for short. He would maintain this nickname throughout his entire military career. On what little free time they did have, the crew would venture twelve miles into Foggia to watch films or go into bars. John noted that some of the American soldiers would go into “these little houses of ill repute. That wasn’t for me, but they did have that.” Mostly, John and the guys would play cards, typically gambling for cigarettes rather than money.

Each night before going to bed, the crew would look on the bulletin board to see if they were scheduled to fly the following day. When scheduled for a mission, their day would begin at around four o’clock in the morning. After receiving the morning briefing, which included their flight path and target destination, the men would make their way to the aircraft for final inspections. They checked the instrument panels, radios, and guns to make sure that the mechanics had not made any mistakes. “But I had the experience of going through maintenance school prior to
combat. So the crew kind of looked at me” to make sure that everything was mechanically sound. The crew and “I went over the whole airplane” before takeoff.

One of the standards that Brinser set down for his crew was “that you fly every position. Even if you’re the pilot, you still fly tail-gunner.” This meant that each man was trained on every position within the aircraft so that “if something happens, somebody else could move into that position.” John would constantly talk to the crew over the radio to make sure that everyone’s oxygen was flowing and that their guns were not jammed. He would ask, “Well what’s going on back there? Or how does it feel on your short burst?” Once the bombers went into a tight formation, everyone would maintain their original positions, particularly while flying over the target. John wanted everyone on his plane to be aware of each position and to think about what each one was capable of doing. One of the best places on the B-17 to have a gun, in John’s opinion, was in the tail. “He needed to be there and he needed to be a good shot. That way the German fighters couldn’t come into your tail.”

Once in the air, the various bomb squadrons made up of seven aircraft would make miniature formations, and then the squadrons would tighten up to make the whole formation of usually two hundred or more aircraft. “When you flew in front you were the lead. Or you were right wing or left wing. Or you were second nose, which was the one right behind the first one. The last one in, the seventh one, that was ‘tail-end Charlie’ and he was all the way in the back.” John described this using hand signals to illustrate how each aircraft would come into formation. The bombing formation would tighten up the closer to the target it came. “When you go over the target, I’d say that your wingtip is maybe six feet from” the plane’s fuselage next to you. The pilot must maintain speed and elevation “because if you’re wing is up above his, but you’re shifted in, you’ve got to be careful not to go down, or you could chew his wing off with your propeller.” The lead aircraft was the one who would sight the target, and once their bombs were released, others in the formation would follow suit. Speaking about the bombardier, John said, “It wasn’t an easy job. It’s not like today when they have all of the special sights that they can drop it down the chimney of a castle. I mean we hope we hit the castle.”

During a bombing mission, aircraft generally flew at around 32,000 feet. The B-17 had a non-pressurized cabin which forced the crew to endure subzero temperatures throughout the duration of the flight. The men at the front of the plane, pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, and navigator wore electric suits. Despite wearing a thick jacket and gloves “there’s still no way to keep warm while you’re up there,” John said. Another element that John and his crew
endured was the most detrimental of all: flak. The German anti-aircraft batteries surrounded target areas which the bombers were attempting to reach. Once in formation, bombers had little choice but to fly straight through the black puffs of smoke that bore thousands of pieces of shrapnel. “It didn’t make much difference where you were” inside the plane. [27] “If they got the height of the flak, I mean they really put it up there.” [28] John and his crew successfully completed twelve bombing missions before falling victim to German flak guns. “I flew missions over oil refineries in Hungary and railroad yards up in Hanover, Germany.” But his thirteenth mission, flown on Friday the thirteenth, October, 1944, “that’s the one that really stands out.” [29] 

President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), and Winston Churchill met to discuss bombing strategy in January, 1943. They agreed to what would be referred to as ‘round the clock bombing’ during the Casablanca conference. This outlined American precision bombing of industrial targets during the day, British area bombing during the night [30]. Henceforth, an all-out bomber offensive would attempt to bring the German industry to a standstill.

On October 13th, 1944, Brinser and his crew did not fly the Jeanette Naomi. Instead, their B-17 was named the Rita Ann. The target was the southern oil refinery outside of Blechhammer, Germany. They experienced troubles with one of their engines on the way but were able to make it to the target and drop their payload. However, the Rita Ann was badly damaged by flak while flying over the oil refinery. Soon after, three engines had been rendered useless and the Rita Ann was flying with only a single engine and rapidly losing altitude and speed. They attempted to make it over Switzerland before bailing out in order to be in unoccupied territory. “But we didn’t make it. We made it to Czechoslovakia.” [31] Two P-51 Mustangs escorted the Rita Ann until their elevation became too low. They were in radio contact until the captain gave the orders for the crew to abandon ship.

On Foot in Slovakia:

All ten crewmembers made it out of the aircraft before it crashed. The navigator, Gordon C. Wheeler, “bailed out first and we don’t know what happened to him.” John recounted his recollection of his second time ever using a parachute. “We went out through the bomb bays. We put a foot on the side and one on the other side and nothing below. Then you just pull your feet together and down you go. It takes 288 feet for that parachute to open and stop your fall. That’s all it takes.” [32] John dropped into a wooded area and spent the first night by himself. He did not realize until he was out of the aircraft and falling towards the earth that a piece of flak was lodged in his left leg. After the first night he came upon a local farm. John told me that the farmer only “had a pitchfork and I had my .45 so that
was all right.”[33] The man motioned for John to come inside his house. The farmer’s wife spoke enough English for her and John to communicate. He told her about his leg, and she left momentarily. Upon her return, she was joined by a female nurse. “She took the piece of shrapnel out of my leg and taped it up.”[34] After describing the incident John reached into his pocket and pulled out his keychain. Attached to the keychain was the piece of shrapnel that was embedded in his leg over sixty years ago. “I carry it around as a memory. That’s a piece of .88 millimeter.”[35] John’s face and hands had also endured wounds caused from shattered glass.

The farmer and his wife took John into the nearby town soon after. The town was Banska Bystrica, Slovakia, and they handed him over to the Slovak partisans there. The partisans were an underground resistance movement made up of Czechs, Slovaks, and Russians revolting against the Nazis. John was led into a barracks where he was reunited with part of his crew, along with several other American soldiers. “We had four naval officers with us in Banska Bystrica. They were dropped in by parachute behind enemy lines, and they were the ones who spoke the language.”[36] These naval officers worked in tandem with the American OSS (Office of Strategic Services) team in the region planning and carrying out clandestine operations behind enemy lines to disrupt German operations in the area. The OSS team had met up with the partisan group in Banska Bystrica and they were coordinating their efforts against the Germans.[37]

Despite the desire of the crew of the Rita Ann to get back to Italy and out of occupied territory, there was very little that they could do. The OSS team contacted the 15th Air Force headquarters on their behalf, attempting to get a pair of B-17’s to come pick them up, to no avail. Even the partisans tried to coordinate a flight over to Russia for John and the other crewmembers, “but that didn’t happen either.”[38] The partisans fed them, and they “were free to go around the town to any place we wanted and meet people. We could go see a movie; we couldn’t understand it, but at least we’d have something to do and keep us out of trouble. It wasn’t bad.”[39] After several weeks in Banska Bystrica, German troops started to close in around the town. German “Stuka” dive-bombers began attacking the city on a daily basis. The partisans decided to seek refuge in the mountains close by. John and his crew accompanied them high into the Alps. Although they were able to escape the Germans temporarily, there would soon be no escaping the cold snap of winter.

I asked John if the partisans were well organized, to which he replied, “Oh yes, they were very organized.”[40] They traveled through the mountains heading eastward towards the Russian border for several weeks
while dodging German artillery shells and enduring hunger and bitter cold. All the while, Brinser was traveling on a 
bad leg. In total, he and his companions spent “thirty days with the Slovak partisans. We walked over the Alps and 
got within twenty miles of Russia before we got caught by the Germans. Seventeen of us: nine from my crew and 
eight from another crew.”[41] John and the other American soldiers had avoided the Germans for almost an entire 
month before an SS unit found them. The SS, or Schutz Staffel, was originally created as Hitler’s personal body 
guard. They were known for their brutality and fervent Nazi ideology. John and his companions remained in the 
custody of the Third Reich for the next seven months.

Prisoner of War:

The SS unit led their captives down the hillside and into a horse stable. Brinser remembers “the Germans’ 
hostile attitude.”[42] After being in the stable for some time, an SS Lieutenant came and spoke to the prisoners. John 
recalls one of his men reaching into his pocket and a small American flag falling onto the ground. The SS officer 
stopped speaking, came over and “stood on top of that flag and pushed it into the manure with his toe.”[43] When the 
sergeant leaned over to pick it up “he got hit in the back of the head with a rifle butt and went flat onto the ground. 
He came to, but that was the way that they treated us there.”[44] The German officer bluntly told them “that prisoners 
take too much work and that we may be shot in the morning.”[45]

Fortunately for the American airmen, there was a Wehrmacht officer, a pilot who had been shot down in the 
area, who was en route to an army camp twelve miles away and offered to take the prisoners off the SS unit’s hands. 
He assured the Americans that they would be taken care of as prisoners of war, an offer that the SS officers were 
seemingly not willing to match. One can only speculate, but was this act of compassion motivated by camaraderie 
among airmen? What Brinser recalls is that, “we went the twelve miles and went to the Wehrmacht with our hands up 
and then they took us and started moving us back to Germany.”[46] John, his crew, and the other Americans were 
placed on boxcars and sent to Frankfurt, Germany, for an interrogation process before their ultimate destination: prison 
camp.

John arrived in Frankfurt and was immediately taken to be interrogated by the Gestapo. Led into a secluded 
and low lit room, John sat down in front of a German officer. On the table between them lay a file folder overstuffed 
with papers. The interrogation began with a myriad of questions in order to find out “if you were any use to 
them.”[47] Eventually the Gestapo revealed a piece of paper that “had my name, rank, and serial number. On there 
they had my mother’s, father’s, and sister’s name and where I lived back in Pennsylvania. They had all the
John was asked to sign a document certifying that all of the information was correct. He placed the pen point down onto the paper and scratched it from bottom to top cutting it in half. John was repaid with two days in solitary confinement. A different German officer interrogated him after his stint in solitary and asked Brinser to sign the same piece of paper. John told him, “I won’t sign that. You have everything you need: my name, rank, and serial number, and that’s all you get”. He reached across the table, picked up the paper and ripped it in two. John was sent back to solitary. The following morning, the Germans took John out of solitary and lined him up with other POWs getting onto railroad cars. They were heading to Stalag Luft 1 prison camp.

Brinser and the other POWs were crammed into the boxcars that awaited them. “We had over fifty in the boxcar with us, and you didn’t have room to lie down”. They traveled from Frankfurt to the northern part of Germany near the Baltic Sea. The trains ran only during the daytime and remained stopped at night. John awoke one morning, and upon looking out of the small window on the cattle car, realized that “we were at one of the places where they killed the Jews. We saw piles of bodies; men, women, and children. Bare naked and some of them with just bones showing.” While recounting his story John stopped speaking for a moment. The disturbing memory was clearly difficult for him to conjure. Eventually, he looked me straight in the eye and uttered, “And that’s something that I have never forgot.” I asked John how much he and the other Americans knew about the Holocaust during the war. He replied, “Well we knew that the Germans were killing a lot of the Jews. We heard that they were killing them but they didn’t say how” they were killing them or the unconscionable amount being slaughtered. The look in his eye and the tone of his voice as John detailed this memory for me is something that I cannot quite describe in words.

Stalag Luft 1 was a prisoner of war camp located by the Baltic Sea near Barth, Germany. It was strictly an officer’s camp that consisted of three compounds, each encircled by barbed wire. John would live out the remaining seven months of the war within the confines of this prison camp.

One of the primary requirements that Brinser recalled about life as a POW was the morning and evening roll calls. At five o’clock in the morning, John and the rest of the prisoners were obligated to line up in rows of five in order for the German guards to count them. The process was repeated at five o’clock in the evening. Fortunately, Stalag Luft 1 was not a labor camp so as long as everyone was present for roll call, the prisoners had the rest of the day to themselves. This did not, however, make life more enjoyable and caused a perpetual state of boredom.

The Germans fed their prisoners soup and bread each day. The soup was generally made from rotten potatoes
and cabbage. The bread, known amongst the soldiers as black bread, was made out of bruised rye grain, sugar beets, saw dust, and minced leaves and straw. John recalled that on occasion they were given imitation coffee as well. Sporadically, the prisoners would receive a portion of meat to eat. “It was horsemeat,” John recollected. [54]

Things for John and the other POWs in Stalag Luft 1 would have been a lot worse had it not been for the International Red Cross. Once a week the prisoners received a fourteen pound Red Cross parcel that contained a blanket, food, and five packs of Lucky Strikes. Having cigarettes was essential to life within the prison camp. They could be used to barter with other prisoners or German guards. Even if you were not yourself a smoker, cigarettes still had value. They were the primary form of currency within the camp.

The prisoners of war at Stalag Luft 1 had another form of bartering similar to an ‘I owe you’. On several occasions John remembers writing the equivalent of a check in order to obtain extra food rations or cigarettes. On a piece of paper, the POWs would write their name, the name and location of their bank back in the States, and the amount of money. After the war, John had several checks that he went and cashed at his parents bank in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Totaling twenty-six dollars, the bank manger told him, “This is quite something that I have never seen before.” John replied, “Well you’ve never been over there before.” [55] This was a creative form of trading that became a regular occurrence at Stalag Luft 1.

John spent a significant amount of his time in prison camp making pot and pans out of empty tin cans that came in the Red Cross parcels. His self taught occupation inside Stalag Luft 1 earned him the nickname “Tin Bender”. This provided a great way for John to trade for extra food or cigarettes, as his pots and pans were in high demand amongst the prisoners.

On April 12th, 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt passed away. Elected to his fourth term, FDR had played a significant role during the Second World War. John and the other American POWs at Stalag Luft 1 were shocked when they heard the news. “We all thought well of him.” [56] In his honor, all the American soldiers in John’s prison camp wore a black ribbon around their arms for thirty days. “I thought that he was an excellent president and a good man.” [57] John remembers hearing FDR speak two different times back in the United States before entering the service, in both Washington D.C. and Colorado. “I didn’t get up to shake his hand, but I did see him,” John recalled. [58] He went on to compliment FDR for not allowing his disability to interfere with leading the country during the war. Nazi Germany was close to defeat when FDR died. For the prisoners in Stalag Luft 1, the war’s end could not come soon enough.
The POWs were constantly attempting to come up with ways to escape. John recounted the various ways that men tried to escape from prison camp. He mentioned prisoners trying to get out by crawling up underneath the garbage trucks and riding to the trash dump. POWs also tried stealing different types of clothing in order to impersonate someone else and get through the guards. One memory that really stuck out for John was a prisoner in Stalag Luft 1 pole-vaulting over the fences. The Red Cross had given this particular officer who was an athlete and a pole-vaulter from the United States a pole for him to practice with. One evening he made his attempt. “He cleared both fences and started running. We don’t know what happened to him.”[59]

John and the others in his barracks made their own attempt to escape as well. They had dug a tunnel from underneath their barracks that burrowed out beyond the fences. “We got out past the fences, and when we started to go out they knew it. The Germans were right there waiting and they took us back and put us in solitary.”[60] John stated that very few escape attempts by the POWs in Stalag Luft 1 were ever successful. “Most of them got caught, but it was something to do.”[61]

Toward the end of April, 1945, a German guard approached John stating that he had information worth cartons of cigarettes. The guard informed Brinser that the Russians were approaching Stalag Luft 1 and that the prisoners would be liberated in a matter of days. John struck no deal with the German until several days later the sound of artillery could be heard in the distance. He sought out the guard and repaid him ten packs of cigarettes for the information.

On the first day of May, 1945, the Red Army liberated Stalag Luft 1, close to 9,000 American and British officers in total. However, the Russians made no effort to evacuate the POWs from the area. Eventually, American command brought in a fleet of B-17’s in order to airlift the POWs back to France. John recalls riding in the fuselage of a B-17 with twenty other men on their way to Camp Lucky Strike in Janville, France on May 15th.[62]

After landing at Camp Lucky Strike, John remembers all of the POWs lining up on the runway. Soon after, the Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower came walking up the tarmac. General Eisenhower walked the entire length of the runway shaking each man’s hand. John specifically remembers Ike shaking his hand and saying to him, “Welcome home.”[63]

Analysis of Strategic Bombing:

Strategic bombing was effective in slowing down the German wartime economy. In 1944, Albert Speer estimated that Germany had produced 35 percent fewer tanks and 31 percent fewer aircraft due to the strategic
bombers of the western Allies. [64] World War II historian Donald L. Miller writes that, “From January 1945 on, German armies on both the Eastern and Western fronts would experience severe shortages of both fuel and weapons, the direct result of the bomber war.” Moreover, bombing raids played a crucial role in the success of the D-Day invasion, as they would disrupt communication lines and railroad routes behind the Atlantic Wall. Richard Overy writes that, “By the end of 1943 there were 55,000 anti-aircraft guns to combat the air offensive – including 75 per cent of the famous 88-millimetre gun, which had doubled with such success as an anti-tank weapon on the eastern front.”[66] He goes on to tell his readers that, “the bombing also ate into Germany’s scarce manpower; by 1944 an estimated two million Germans were engaged in anti-aircraft defense…”. These men were desperately needed for the defense against the Soviet onslaught coming from the east.

The 8th Air Force and RAF that flew out of England, and later the 15th Air Force based in Italy, projected their bombing might over the skies of Europe until the final chapter of the war. Despite what some inter-war theorists argued, bombing alone could not have won the war independently. Airpower did not have thousands of years of history to draw from, as army and navy tacticians did. It was air, land, and sea power working in tandem that led to the victory of the Allies. Strategic bombing was instrumental in the defeat of Nazi Germany. There was no single bombing raid that turned the tide of the war. What the bombing campaign did was slowly tighten the noose around Germany’s neck, strangle its economy, and undermine its ability to wage war. The Second World War in Europe officially ended on May 7th, 1945 with the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. Hitler’s vision of a ‘Thousand-Year Reich’ had expired after only twelve years.

After World War II & Start of the Cold War:

The Cold War in its early stages was focused above all on recently defeated Germany. Germany was divided into four occupational zones run by the French, British, Americans, and the Soviet Union. The capital Berlin, seized by the Red Army during the final chapter of the war, was also divided into four zones, despite the city being located deep within the Soviet zone. This created a dependence on Soviet cooperation for access to Berlin. [68] Tensions continued to rise until the USSR blocked all road, rail, and barge traffic into West Berlin. Thereafter the West supplied starving Berliners through the air in what was known as the Berlin Air Lift.

John Brinser was one of the pilots who flew supplies into East Germany during the Berlin Air Lift. He flew a C-47 transport aircraft and was responsible for hauling large bags of coal. Brinser recalls enjoying carrying coal, “because it was heavier, and I liked that better.”[69] Flying back and forth several times per day, John participated in
this colossal effort for seven months.

I asked John whether it felt different to be supplying the Germans in the Cold War, when several years before John had been bombing targets within Germany. He replied, “We just thought it was helping the people because they didn’t have help from the Russians. It was all political but it just worked out that way. We didn’t worry as long as they gave us the airway to fly in, that’s all we wanted as the pilots.” Eventually, the Soviets lifted the blockade after almost a year.

The Korean War:

Due to technological advances, the Korean War saw the first dogfights between jet aircraft. Russian MIG-15s were matched against the American F-86 Sabres, making airpower a significant aspect of the war. John Brinser was one of the American pilots flying an F-86 during the war. The F-86 was the only jet aircraft that John flew during his career as a pilot. He stated that he preferred propeller aircraft over the new jets. “I liked those propellers out there. I liked that noise.”

Often known as “the Forgotten War”, the Korean War illustrates the containment strategy of the U.S. becoming fully militarized. Moreover, Korea was the first war to take place during the nuclear age. The fact that it remained a limited war, meaning no nuclear weapons were deployed, is significant. Reflecting on the Korean War, John stated, “Well it was a war as they call it, but it was a ‘word war’ because it was all political. There were certain things that you could and couldn’t do. We didn’t have it like we had in World War II. Of course that’s just my opinion.”

John Brinser retired from military service in 1969 as a Lieutenant Colonel. He had proudly served his country for 26 ½ years. Reflecting upon his career he stated, “It has been a wonderful career. It was a hard career at times, but I don’t think that anybody should feel that they couldn’t do it. It just takes a little bit of work. It was good work.”

John in 2007:

John Brinser, who will turn 83 this year, was a participant in several of the most significant events of the 20th Century. Pilot, prisoner of war, and eyewitness to the Holocaust – John had a distinguished military career spanning almost three decades. Currently, he spends time with his wife Lorna in their pleasant Northern Colorado home. His hobbies include woodworking, computers, and building model airplanes. He has spent many years doing volunteer work, including working with handicapped adults and supervising a local Habitat for Humanity project. He is also an active member in his church. During our final interview John smiled and said, “It’s been quite a life.” I have to
agree with him.

Conclusion:

Oral history can simply be defined as the “first hand recollections of people interviewed by a historian.” Despite this simplistic definition, there are a myriad of complexities involved. Oral history, which differs from oral tradition, has emerged over the past sixty years as a new method of historical documentation. Many of the tactics for oral history’s methodology have been borrowed from sociology and anthropology. Indeed, there are some inherent flaws that exist within oral history. For instance, the possibility that the interviewee has a distorted recollection of the events due to age or a nostalgic interpretation can lead to an oral account being historically inaccurate. In addition, the interviewee also possesses the advantage of hindsight which can influence the explanation of the series of events. On the other hand, the historian may have a bias toward the subject that he or she has chosen to study. Keeping all of this in mind, oral history has come under heavy scrutiny from some in the academic community.

The critics of oral history have legitimate premises; however, their conclusions do not match my own. There is much to be learned from oral history. Similar to looking at any primary source, it takes skill from the historian to distill the information and understand its importance. The same principle applies to oral history. It would be difficult to argue that oral history is the best way to learn about a historical time period. However, it is not altogether useless. Oral histories should be used as a building block to construct the whole. Just like an artifact for an archeologist, it can give the historian something tangible to work with in order to further understand the historical event they are studying.

In this particular instance, the oral history of John Brinser is one single piece that contributes to the whole puzzle of World War II. In itself, it does not serve as an authoritative text of the war. It does, however, preserve the story of one man’s first-hand experience within the most colossal conflict in human history and is a building block that helps to construct the entire history of the Second World War.

[8] Ibid.

John Brinser, interview with author, April 1, 2007.


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-Comparative Book Review-

If This is a Man (Survival in Auschwitz), Primo Levi and Speak You Also, A Survivor’s Reckoning, Paul Steinberg

Kellie Rae Rockey

You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
  Consider if this is a man
  Who works in the mud
  Who does not know peace
  Who fights for a scrap of bread
  Who dies because of a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
  Without hair and without name
  With no more strength to remember,
  Her eyes empty and her womb cold
  Like a frog in winter.
Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising:
Repeat them to your children,
  Or may your house fall apart,
  May illness impede you,
  May your children turn their faces from you. [1]

Primo Levi

Many people have written about their experiences in Auschwitz, and the descriptions of psychological and physical torture and terror are often extremely similar and share distinct characteristics: the smell of the overcrowded boxcar, the harsh light (whether sunshine or electric lamp) when disembarking at the ramp, the strange site of the skeletal prisoners at the camp (surely that will not be me), the confusion, noise, fear and horror during the Selection process, watching those directed to the left while marching with those selected to the right, the disinfection process, the extreme discomfort caused by the elements (sometimes heat but most often merciless cold), induction into the camp where the old-numbers point to the smoke and say “There’s your mother, your wife, your child”. We’ve grown accustomed to some of the more common psychological elements of the dehumanization of the prisoners: humiliation,
dissociation of mind from body, random beatings, constant and arbitrary terror, useless work designed to accomplish
death faster, being a number without a name, past and present and future bound up in desperate want for food or water
or warmth, rare but life-saving companionship and that thing which was most elusive—survival out of luck or an
ability to adapt to the pressures or both.

Unique to the world of Holocaust Memoir is a story in which the same characters, time, place, and inhabited
world are described by two separate individuals. Primo Levi’s seminal work If This is a Man (Survival in Auschwitz)
and Paul Steinberg’s Speak You Also, A Survivor’s Reckoning encompass this unlikely and unique perspective.
Primo Levi’s character Henri, in the book which was first translated into English in 1958, is none other than Paul
Steinberg. Steinberg, in turn, writes sometimes in answer, sometimes in explanation but mostly from his own personal
experience of the same time, work, people and situations some forty years later. This rare corroboration of the same
events is an opportunity to explore the psychological experience of the camp from the perspective of these two
different people with the “control” being that of the same or exceptionally similar situations. What similarities and
differences emerge? What is their distinct and separate understanding of the psychology of survival? What is the
potential value of reading these two memoirs together?

Primo Levi was captured in the mountains of Italy, December 13, 1943. He was 24 years old, a partisan with
“a moderate and abstract sense of rebellion” but without guidance, money or material. He was moved to Fossoli, a
camp originally used to house American and British prisoners of war, near Modena at the end of January, 1944. He
was deported to Auschwitz on February 22, 1944. He knew, if not exactly where he was going, what lay in store.
“Only a minority of ingenuous and deluded souls continued to hope; we others had often spoken with the Polish and
Croat refugees and we knew what departure meant.” There were 45 people in his boxcar, 4 of whom survived.
Of the 650 total in the transport only 96 men and 29 women entered the camp at Auschwitz, 30 of whom, including
Levi, were loaded into a truck and driven to Monowitz-Buna.

Although Paul Steinberg was aware of the round-ups of Jews in Paris, they had yet to come to his location in
the 16th Arrondissement. An informant’s letter led to his arrest at a local bakery he frequented on September 23, 1943.
He was 17. The police let him slip into a book store on his way to the police station and there he purchased a book of
analytical inorganic chemistry, memorization of which would ultimately save his life. He spent twelve days in
Drancy. On October 7, 1943 he was loaded in a boxcar with 50 others, 1050 total in the transport, of whom 340
Only 35 were still alive by January, 1944. “Of course, we hadn’t the foggiest idea where we were going. Theories: a ghetto, a factory, a labor camp near a mine, in Bavaria, or close to Berlin, or in Poland.” On October 10, 1943 Paul Steinberg entered the camp at Monowitz-Buna, a scant four months before Primo Levi. In a place designed to kill a person within two to three months by exhaustion and starvation, four months was a lifetime of experience.

Both Levi and Steinberg concentrate certain energy on the initial disinfection/shower sequences and their responses to the first affront of seeing their fellow men completely nude and discombobulated and the strange sight of previously known comrades unrecognizable after the shearing of hair and addition of camp garb. Similarly, attention is also given in these first pages to the introduction to the rules, the etiquette, and the Lager (camp) and both allude to what the real introduction and education is, that of realizing, as Levi says, “Already my own body is not my own”.

As is commonly referenced in Holocaust memoir, the long road through the disinfection process and entrance into the camp is also the psychological dismemberment of the inmate. Last valuables are confiscated which effectively cuts the last physical ties to loved ones or intimate things; entrance clothing is exchanged for the striped camp uniform, effectively dismantling the outward appearance of the individual; heads and bodies are shorn, making even those well known to the inmates virtually unrecognizable; lastly, inmates are deprived of their names which are replaced with tattooed numbers: one enters a man and one lives as branded chattel. Steinberg writes, “I looked around and saw Philippe; I had to look twice. Before me stood not Philippe but a gallows bird…I must have given him the same impression.” Levi similarly records, “Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us…They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have find ourselves the strength to do so, so that behind the name something of us…still remains.”

On the back cover of Levi’s book, David Caute of the *New Statesmen* describes the book thus: “Survival in Auschwitz is a stark prose poem on the deepest sufferings of man…” Therein lies the first and most immediate difference between the two books. Levi writes as poet-historian-anthropologist-scientist. Nothing is generalized; no motive or understanding is un-inspected. The entire experience is written with exactness and precision, and yet the language is poetic, moving, and haunting. Levi spends very little time on his life before Auschwitz. Instead, the book
is written as an introduction to what Levi calls “This exceptional human state...A gigantic biological and social experiment,”[20] which is Auschwitz, utilizing personal experience to exemplify the minute inside the whole. Great care is used to explain the workings of each area of life: work, food, sleep, survival, death, companionship, morality, frailty, loyalty, commerce, and ethics. Inside discussion of each experience is a questioning and answering of how it is men survive and at what cost. It is not enough to explain the situation, he must also examine how and why the situation has the crucial impact it has. It is written almost as a scientific paper explaining the causes, effects, and side effects of the experiment, but as eloquently and as concisely as a poet. “What we have so far said...concerns the ambiguous life of the lager...we...ask ourselves if it is necessary or good to retain any memory...To this question we feel that we have to reply in the affirmative. We are in fact convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis...there comes to light the existence of two particularly well differentiated categories among men—the saved and the drowned.”[21] The argument is logical and laid out in a clear order and yet poetry and subtlety are used as the ultimate description of the average Haftling (the saved) and the pathetic Muselmann (the drowned).

Levi writes from the perspective of explaining the universal (the Lager) in particular (his experience); Steinberg writes from his own personal experience, which occasionally includes a more general overview. While Levi writes with immediacy, in the present tense, Steinberg writes in both past and present tenses, and shifts often between time and place—now the Lager, now Drancy, now his study in present day Paris, now the death of his friend Philippe, now the concern of how moods while writing his memoir will effect his family. His book includes four chapters, titled “Digression I,” etc., in which he takes a step away from the story of his internment to purposefully touch on it or recount it from the distance of fifty years. He occasionally does this at especially upsetting times inside the story chapters as well, as in the case of his friend Philippe’s death. “I asked the doctor where Philippe was...he replied ‘But he died three days ago.’ In this chapter I have written about the death of Philippe. My friend. I’ve done my very best to remember what he looked like, his face, his profile, the sound of his voice. There’s nothing left, not the slightest trace. If I went back fifty years, would I even recognize him? Philippe died. And now he has died again, forever. Am I not the last being on this earth to have known him when he was alive and to have loved him, before letting him leave without holding his hand?”[22] Whereas Levi is a poet and creates sublime pathos from a sometimes aloof stance, Steinberg is a realist, imminently self-aware and current in his speech, with an often self-accusatory or self-explanatory feel.

It is no surprise, then, that the studied examples of the psychology of survival are Levi’s. Neither is it surprising when his tone shifts away from that of scientist dissecting how and why a person is able to survive to that
of the poet, evoking intrinsic despair and fatalism while examining the concept of morality. “The news [of the evacuation of the camp on 1/18/45] excited no direct emotion in me. Already for many months I had no longer felt any pain, joy or fear, except in that detached and distanced manner characteristic of the Lager, which might be described as conditional: if I still had my former sensitivity, I thought, this would be an extremely moving moment…

The rhythm of the great machine of the Lager was extinguished.” [23] Steinberg, grounded in realism, points out his psychological epiphanies in clearer cut language which renders it a feeling of accessibility and commonality, especially as he includes his psychological well-being in the present as well as in the Lager. “It’s already a month since I began writing, and I’m starting to feel the effects of my plunge into the depths. My sleep grows more and more troubled…my disconnected brain dredges up images I thought were dead and buried…I’ve run into a major problem I had not anticipated. I’m having difficulty separating two time frames: the description of the event as it happened (or at least as I remember it) and the vision or interpretation of it I tend to favor after later experience has erased the initial impression…Still…I ought to be able to get very close to what really happened. I must not let the writings of other witnesses affect me.” [24]

Both Levi and Steinberg credit psychological adaptability as being one element which is largely responsible for a person’s survival. Levi says, “Perfect happiness is unrealizable, few…pause to consider the antithesis: that perfect unhappiness is equally unattainable.” [25] Levi also discusses survival and adaptability in connection with morality. In Chapter 8, “This Side of Good and Evil,” Levi examines commerce, trade, ethics, rules of supply and demand, and concludes with a paragraph on theft and what the word means in the Lager, how it is accepted, encouraged, reinforced, and punished. He finishes by saying, “We now invite the reader to contemplate…the words ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘just’ and ‘unjust’; let everybody judge…how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire.” [26] More in depth discussion of the roles of adaptability and morality is found in the following chapter “The Drowned and the Saved” in which the hierarchy of the Haftlings is dissected and the adaptability, motivations, and questions of morality are closely examined. The bottom of the bottom, the drowned, is the Muselmann personified by Null Achtzehn (018) who is an automaton, whose name is unknown outside of the numbers of 018 and who, because of his weakness, is essentially left for dead even though he is still functionally alive. [27] The saved are those who adapt somehow and the good among them are the ones who remain moral inside of the amoral system. This discussion is how we meet Henri. Henri’s methods to surviving are organization, pity, and theft. He is a master organizer who can change an English POW’s cigarette into real food. “Henri was once seen in the act of eating a real hard-boiled
But his real gift, according to Levi, is his ability to manipulate to pity any number of people who would potentially harm him, in essence making them his protector and raising him to the stature of a *Prominenz*. Although Levi says, “To speak with Henri is useful and pleasant… [but he is] the enemy of all, inhumanly cunning and incomprehensible.” In his final statement of this chapter, we are left feeling that somehow Henri is more morally reprehensible in his cunning manipulations than any of the other examples he examines. Is that because in order to stay a *Prominenz* one must ultimately become an oppressor to someone? Again the psychology of survival butts up against the question of morality in Levi’s examinations. He says, “One offers a position of privilege to a few… in a state of slavery, exacting in exchange the betrayal of natural solidarity… when he is given command… he will be cruel and tyrannical.”

Steinberg’s psychological assertions are far more straightforward and to the point. “To portray anguish. A world where you sink because you don’t know how to swim. To follow the process, the degradation of human beings before annihilation. The death of feeling, the death of thought, then the death of the man… then for a lucky few of us, gradual adaptation, the upward climb, and transformation into a different variety of human being… extermination-camp man.” Steinberg also lays out a hierarchy, but of those who die first: those who rebelled and were killed or who killed themselves immediately, those who despaired and became the *Muselmann*, those of highly structured personalities who could not adapt. He does not contemplate morality, outside of his own, but he does credit sheer luck as being at least as important as adaptability to survival. He says, “Who will tell me through what alchemy Robert the Reed (an extremely ill inmate forced on the death march) survived without anyone’s help and Feldbaum the Oak (a *Prominenz*), who had everything on his side, was destroyed? Perhaps there is some mysterious gene… that makes you allergic to death.” Steinberg also gives us extremely valuable insight into the survivor’s life after the *Lager*, how fifty years later, the pain is not extinguished, the memories are at the surface, and “I’ve gone back to the camp. I spend all my time there, searching for my vanished footsteps.” A sincere disadvantage to his writing was in knowing that Primo Levi, forty years before, said this about him, “I know that Henri is living today. I would give much to know his life as a free man, but I do not want to see him again.”

A prevalent feeling throughout Steinberg’s book is a sense of “Primo Levi, please, give me a chance to explain…” Are readers being manipulated by Henri or are readers being given an opportunity to explore the fickleness of man’s judgments against another man in a microcosm world of survival of the fittest, whatever that meant? It is a valuable question to ask, ultimately. Even under the oppressor’s boot, the oppressed somehow find another to oppress.
—Henri as camp Prominenz or Primo Levi as a survivor offering the best and last judgment of that world and the people in it. Celan’s quote, from which Steinberg takes his title, is telling of what I think Steinberg ultimately wished to accomplish and that is to give his say, his memories of those things immortalized in Primo Levi’s book. He says of himself, “I began my second life at eighteen years of age. Aside from the faults that…I know to be irremediable, I believe I’ve led an upright life…but I have never been able to break free of my former existence. I lived and am still living in humiliation, I am still the passive witness of Philippe’s death, the person who slapped the old Jew, the boy hiding out in the latrines, the toady who fawned on brutes and murderers to make sure of his extra helpings of soup.”[35] “From a vulnerable, candid, and warmly affectionate youth burst forth, like a butterfly from a chrysalis, that cold and calculating creature singled out by Primo Levi…My friend…the German translator of some of Primo Levi’s books…tells me to speak, to my wife, my children, my friends…according to him, if Primo Levi died, it’s because he no longer had a door to the outside or people to lend a sympathetic ear.”[36] And finally, “Perhaps I survived so that I might give an account, one of the very last.”[37]

Primo Levi died after a fall in 1987. There are some who adamantly argue that it was suicide, as Steinberg intimates, and some who just as vociferously argue that it was an accident. Either way his marker says this only, “Primo Levi, 174517, 1919-1987”. Paul Steinberg, 157239, died December, 1999, months after finishing his book. Lest we forget.

Ibid., 14.
Ibid., 17.
Ibid., 20.
Ibid., 21.
Steinberg, *Speak You Also*, 3-8.
Ibid., 18.
Ibid., 19.
Ibid., 27.
Ibid., 19.
Ibid., 40.
Steinberg, *Speak You Also*, 43.
Ibid., 87.
Ibid., 87.
Steinberg, *Speak You Also*, 59.
Steinberg, *Speak You Also*, 61-62.
Ibid., 86.
Ibid., 88.
Ibid., 99.
Ibid., 91.
Steinberg, *Speak You Also*, 62-63.
Ibid., 47-48.
Ibid., 81.
Ibid., 103.
Steinberg, *Speak You Also*, 162.
Ibid., 105.
Ibid., 163.
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